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SUBJECT: 2006 CHINESE BLOGGERS CONFERENCE

REF: 05 SHANGHAI 4636

CLASSIFIED BY: Mary Tarnowka, Section Chief, Political/Economic
Section, U.S. Consulate Shanghai.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

[¶1.](#) (C) Summary: The Second Annual Chinese Bloggers Conference took place in Hangzhou from October 28-29. Organizers had problems in holding the conference and had to switch venues twice. While the public sessions suffered from uninspiring speakers, a conference organizer said there were 20 private sessions in which participants discussed issues such as overcoming China's firewall, human rights and NGOs. In discussions with Poloff, most conference participants opposed the government's plans to force bloggers to register with their real names. Organizers plan to modify the format at next year's conference to make sessions more focused and provide for participation by invitation only. End Summary.

Conference Venues

[¶2.](#) (C) Poloff and FSN Political Assistant attended the Second Annual Chinese Blogger Conference in Hangzhou on October 28-29. Like the first conference, which was held in Shanghai last year (reftel), the 2006 conference was organized by local bloggers without government involvement. Conference organizer and prominent blogger Isaac Mao in a discussion with Poloff on November 7, said around 300 people attended the conference. While most of the participants were from mainland China, a few came from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and the United States. Mao added that over 500 people had registered online to attend, but many did not show up because the conference changed its venue two times in the final weeks before the event.

[¶3.](#) (C) According to one organizer's blog, the conference was originally scheduled to be held at a conference center located at Zhejiang University. In early October, organizers had to

move to another venue after they were told that there would be a governmental meeting at Zhejiang University at the same time as the conference. All of the buildings on the campus were needed for the meeting. The second site was located at Hangzhou University. The day before the conference was scheduled to begin, organizers were told that power was going to be cut off from the building in which the conference was to be held. Organizers quickly found another venue located at a hotel far from the city center.

14. (C) Participants with whom Poloff spoke were not surprised that organizers had problems finding a venue and believed that the power shut off was just an excuse. One participant who was a blogger from Shanghai said he heard that university officials were uncomfortable with the conference and pressured the organizers to move. University officials were worried that students would be attracted to the conference. Poloff stopped by the Hangzhou University site after the end of the first day's sessions and found that the building had electricity. Many of the rooms had lights on and there was music playing in the hallways.

Uninspiring Speakers

15. (C) As a result of the change in venues, the conference was plagued by technical problems. The conference started late

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because most participants had to be bused from the Hangzhou University site to the hotel. The microphones often did not work and there were not enough seats for conference participants. These problems made it difficult for participants to focus on the speakers' presentations. By the afternoon of the first day, many of the participants were not paying attention to the speakers and were either talking to friends or searching the Internet on their laptops.

16. (C) Only a few of the conference sessions touched on substantive issues. Hong Bo who goes by the name Keso on his blog and is one of China's most influential bloggers gave the keynote speech. According to a conference participant, Keso was one of the spiritual leaders of the Chinese blogging community and received approximately 10,000 page views a day on his website. In his speech, he warned against the over-commercialization of Chinese blogs, which he said were fundamentally non-commercial entities. He also criticized the Chinese government's plans to force bloggers to use their real names and said such a plan would have a negative affect on the Chinese blogosphere. In another session, panelists said blogs were a "grassroots media" that played an important role in providing more accurate and diverse information.

17. (C) The other sessions were uninspiring and focused on commercial and technical issues. Over half of the speakers deviated from their assigned topics and spent most of their time urging participants to visit their websites or use their products. Most participants who spoke with Poloff and Political Assistant were not concerned or surprised by the sessions. One participant who was a blogger from Taiwan said that he had been to similar conferences in Taiwan and these conferences always focused on commercial and technical issues. Another participant who had attended the conference last year in Shanghai explained

that most people attended last year's conference to meet friends and have technical exchanges. Many found that it was a good opportunity to promote their business and returned this year with these goals in mind. He was disappointed by the conference but said he would still return next year to keep in touch with friends.

18. (C) In a discussion with Poloff on November 15, Fudan University PHD candidate Robert Deng expressed similar views. Deng is researching the role of bloggers in China and attended the conference as a speaker. He said conference participants were not representative of the blogging community in China. Most of the conference participants were involved in the IT field, in their late 20's or early 30's and male. According to his research, bloggers in China were very diverse and many were not computer experts. He also added that it was not surprising that there was little debate or discussion about substantive issues. He said most bloggers were not comfortable speaking out in public settings and saved their opinions for their blogs.

Real-Name Registration

19. (C) Poloff and Political Assistant were able to talk to some participants about the Chinese government's proposed plan to require bloggers to register under their real names. Most opposed the idea and said it would change what they wrote online. In his talk on building trust on the Internet, Zhongshan University Professor Cheng Lehua said that although real-name registration would provide readers with more personal information about bloggers, it would not increase trust on the Internet and, therefore, was not needed. Deng said that government efforts to control the internet such as real-name registration only had limited effect. While it could prevent people from expressing some views, blogs were important, not because of their content, but because they teach people how to express themselves. By having a blog or learning to use the

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Internet, people learned how to write and communicate. They become more interested in the outside world and involved in issues. Deng believed that this would lead to a fundamental change in Chinese society.

110. (C) Mao said that real-name registration could actually have a positive effect on the Internet. First, it would make people realize the true nature of the Chinese government and make some people more active in opposing governmental controls. Second, it would force people to look for alternatives to mainstream portals. More people would start place their blogs on smaller portals or overseas portals not controlled by the government.

Small Group Sessions

111. (C) Isaac Mao acknowledged that the conference had some problems, but said that it was an overall success. According to

Mao, there were 20 private small group sessions that took place on the margins of the conference in which bloggers discussed issues such as how to overcome the "great firewall" (the system used by the Chinese government to prevent internet users in China from accessing anti-government websites), promoting human rights, and working with NGOs. These sessions had approximately 10 people each and were invite-only. During the sessions, participants came up with ideas on how to tackle sensitive issues. For example, in the next few months participants would introduce a website which would contain information on how to get past the "great firewall" and gain access to controversial websites. (Note: It is not clear if he was referring to "psiphon," a program described in a November 11 International Herald Tribune article that allowed users to circumvent government censorship. End Note)

¶12. (C) Mao also defended the conference's commercial character. First, he said it was natural for the conference to take on a commercial focus since most participants were young entrepreneurs who were looking for ways to improve their businesses. Second, the conference's commercial veneer was useful in preventing governmental interference. The group did not register last year's conference and Mao was concerned that it would not be able to pull off this year's conference without registering it. So it registered the conference as a business meeting and avoided sensitive subjects in the public sessions.

¶13. (C) According to Mao, the conference was created to provide bloggers with an arena to discuss substantive issues. He said that bloggers had been discussing sensitive issues for the past few years online. To protect their privacy, bloggers used programs like Skype to evade government censors. Soon afterwards, a few bloggers decided that it would be useful to meet in person and organized the first bloggers conference. This conference was a great success and a core group of bloggers emerged from it with an interest in promoting change. There were approximately 20 people in this core group. Most of them were male entrepreneurs or professionals in their early thirties. Only one member of this core group was female. The group wanted to hold a second conference to allow it to meet in person since many members lived in different cities and some even lived outside of China. These were the individuals who participated in the private sessions. In addition to creating a website on the "great firewall", the group planned to work with NGOs to assist them in setting up websites. Mao noted that the group wanted to promote change but was not confrontational. It avoided controversial groups such as the Falun Gong or human rights dissidents.

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Future Plans?

¶14. (C) At the end of the conference, Mao announced that the next bloggers conference would be held in Beijing. In private, however, Mao told Poloff that the conference would likely be held in a different city. He was not completely satisfied with how this year's conference was organized. He said that the core group of organizers, many of whom did not live in Hangzhou, left the details of organizing the conference to volunteers in Hangzhou. These volunteers were very naive. Not only had they tried to reserve space on college campuses, but had also publicized the conference to the local media. The propaganda department banned the local media from covering the conference

and local officials began asking specific questions about conference participants and speakers.

¶15. (C) Mao said the core group was discussing how to organize next year's conference. Members wanted to maintain the conference's independence and would likely allow people to attend by invitation only. In addition, there would be multiple tracks at the conference. One track would focus on commercial issues, the other on social issues, and the third on NGOs.
JARRETT